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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000231

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: IS LE PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI BELIEVES ACCEPTABLE POLITICAL COMPROMISE IS WITHIN REACH

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)

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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a 2/12 meeting, Future Movement leader Saad Hariri said that despite premature reports of its demise, the Saudi initiative remains alive, even though the Iranian regime may be trying to back out of its previous commitments.

In essence, the resolution is comprised of three parts: expeditious establishment of the Special Tribunal, a restructuring of the cabinet along an 19-10-1 formula (even though it will be described publicly as 19-11), and an early selection of the next president, followed by a new electoral law, and then parliamentary elections. According to Hariri, Supreme Ayatollah Khamanei had signed off on the deal during the Bandar/Larijani shuttle diplomacy, but the final Iranian notification to Riyadh has been frozen for the past week. Hariri believes Speaker Berri's recent charges that "outside forces" are interfering in Lebanon may indicate the Iranians are reconsidering their commitment, due to Syrian unhappiness with the proposed resolution. In his opinion, the Syrians are deeply concerned the tide may have turned against them and are particularly anxious about the February 12-13 visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Riyadh. Concerning this week's commemoration of the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, his son predicted a massive turnout with broad Christian, Druse and Sunni participation. Hariri also indicated he had received a message from Hassan Nasrallah that Hizballah would refrain from confrontation for at least that day. End summary.

¶2. (C) Future Movement and parliamentary leader Saad Hariri, who had just returned to Lebanon following an extended absence, met with the Ambassador and Special Assistant at his heavily-guarded residence in Qoreitem in west Beirut. Close Hariri advisor MP Ghattas Khoury also attended the meeting. Hariri, who had met with leaders in Moscow and Paris during the past month, has spent the past week in Riyadh waiting in vain for Iranian envoy Ali Larijani to arrive with a completed deal.

ACCEPTABILITY OF SUNNI-SHIA STRIFE DEPENDS ON LOCALE

¶3. (C) Saad Hariri expressed cautious optimism that Iran may be close to approving the long-simmering Saudi initiative for resolving Lebanon's political crisis. He explained that for nearly four weeks, Saudi Prince Bandar ibn Sultan and Iranian envoy Ali Larijani have been closely engaged in

negotiations to come up with a mutually acceptable plan to end Lebanon's flirtation with Sunni-Shia conflict which, according to Hariri, is a specter the Iranian regime is eager to avoid. He said that Bandar's long discussions with the Iranians convinced him that the regime in Tehran does not want to risk its hard fought gains in Lebanon (i.e. Hizballah) with an ill-conceived and unnecessary rupture between Lebanon's Shia and Sunni communities. In the Iranian calculus, what is acceptable in Iraq (where blame for sectarian strife can be foisted onto the Americans) is not the case in Lebanon, where the lack of a physical U.S. presence means that Shia-Sunni violence would very likely be blamed on Tehran's doctrinaire mullahs.

¶4. (C) Possibly accelerated by the unanticipated Shia-on-Sunni violence in Beirut on 1/25, the shuttle diplomacy appeared to have intensified the past two weeks and produced a document that was tentatively approved by all parties, including Supreme Ayatollah Khamanei. This document called for the Special Tribunal ("as is"), a national unity government that would give Lebanon's Shia community a blocking minority (but supposedly not the power to bring down the government), and finally, settle the nettlesome issue of the pro-Syrian presidency of Emile Lahoud. According to Hariri, who has been biding his time in Riyadh, "all Larijani needed was 48 hours" to bring back a signed document from his capital.

¶5. (C) At that point, it appears the Syrians, who anxiously sensed that a deal inimicable to their interests was close to fruition, protested vigorously to their political ally Iran and pulled them back from the decisive move. The Syrian cry of protest was reflected by their puppet Nabih Berri's highly ironic claim last week that "no outside powers" should determine Lebanon's fate. But in Hariri's view, Syria may be

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too late and could well have already lost the initiative to Saudi Arabia.

THE RUSSIAN FACTOR

¶6. (C) Saad Hariri explained that the big difference now was the change in Russia -- which after decades of providing protection to Syria, may now be recalculating its regional interests in a profound way. Hariri recalled a conversation he had earlier this month with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov in which Ivanov supposedly stated that Russia was "fed up" with the unreliable Syrians, who after years of unflagging Russian support, offered little in return of value.

¶7. (C) The Future Movement leader, who actually has less than two years of political experience, expressed his conviction that Russia was now considering a dramatic realignment of its regional relationships with a shift from Syria to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Hariri suggested that Vladimir Putin's visit to Riyadh was far more than a mere diplomatic exchange between two important energy providers: it was the beginning of an important strategic shift -- and Syria knew it.

¶8. (C) Hariri, who enjoys a close relationship with the Saudi royal family, indicated that among the issues to be discussed in Riyadh between King Abdullah and Putin will be Lebanon. In his opinion, Russia, which wants to improve relations with the Saudis, may well use its influence with both Iran and Syria to make them accept the Saudi initiative.

Iran would likely be more amenable to such persuasion, if only to lower Sunni-Shia tensions in an arena they would prefer to see quiet. Syria, however, because such a deal would be so contrary to its thinly-veiled desire to re-exert control over Lebanon, would be a much more difficult task, but if Iran accepts the package -- and directs its paid-for proxy Hizballah to go along as well -- the Syrians will find themselves in an untenable situation. Hariri went so far as

to predict that Russia would not be averse to voting for Chapter VII, if push came to shove.

¶19. (C) In his analysis, even if a completed deal does not result from Putin's visit, enough pressure will have been exerted on Syria that Hariri believes relative peace will hold in Lebanon until the Arab summit scheduled for Riyadh in late March. He argued that sooner or later Syria will realize it has to return to the Arab fold and this requires reconciliation with Saudi Arabia. Therefore, a confluence of factors -- a perceived change in Russia's regional interests, Iranian desire for sectarian peace in Lebanon, a growing Syrian isolation, and an eventual Syrian rapprochement with its Arab brethren -- leads Saad Hariri to believe that the tide may be changing to their favor.

¶10. (C) Despite his conviction that a positive trend was developing, Hariri acknowledged that other March 14th leaders, specifically Jumblatt and Geagea, were less sanguine. These two leaders, both of whom were deeply involved in the 1975-1990 civil war, believe that Syria "would go all the way" in its efforts to destabilize and re-acquire its control over Lebanon. "But I don't so," Hariri stated, "to create the inevitable Shia-on-Sunni violence would produce such a backlash in Sunni Syria, that the Alawite regime would surely fall."

DOMESTIC POLITICS

¶11. (C) Despite gradual overall improvement in the prospects for March 14th, Hariri thought that Speaker Nabih Berri still remains an effective obstacle to rapid progress in economic and political reform in Lebanon. His stubborn allegiance to the regime in Damascus, as well as his tenacious control of parliament, makes even widely accepted steps excessively difficult. Hariri argued it would be rational for Syria to deal with the new political realities, but he stated, "since when can one count on Syria being rational." He concluded that the best way forward was to construct a comprehensive solution with sequential implementation, so that even with Syria's expected efforts to undermine a democratic Lebanon (abetted by Berri's intransigence), slowly but surely a stable, prosperous Lebanon would emerge.

¶12. (C) Looking to this week's expected massive

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commemoration, Hariri promised a powerful, but peaceful demonstration by March 14th. He said that Samir Geagea alone was planning to organize more than 1,000 buses to ferry Lebanese Forces' supporters to the rally, with Walid Jumblatt not far behind with his Druse followers. Earlier that day, Hariri indicated he had received a message from Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah that reportedly stated there would be no attempt at confrontation from Hizballah. Hariri felt this also meant that safe passage was assured through Shia areas of south Beirut by March 14th supporters making their way to Martyr's Square. Additionally, this promise to maintain social order presumably included the other partners in the March 8th opposition, specifically Michel Aoun, Talal Arslan, and Suleiman Franjieh, but Hariri pointedly said that Aoun in particular was completely unpredictable.

REQUEST TO DESIGNATE AOUN AND FPM

¶13. (C) In closing, Saad Hariri revealed his deep animus toward Michel Aoun who he described as "duplicitous and beyond redemption." He asked whether Aoun and his pro-Syrian senior advisors could be placed on a sanctions list, specifically under restraints which would limit the alleged flow of funds into FPM coffers from Syria and Iran. The Ambassador cautioned that Aoun still remains an important part of the political equation in Lebanon, and absent sound

evidence (not hearsay) that the allegations are accurate, it would be premature to take such steps. But he did inform Hariri that all allegations of outside funding would continue to be carefully studied.

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